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# THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

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## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE

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Conducted by  
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### STUDY III SPECIAL PROBLEMS

#### **Required Books**

Coe, *The Psychology of Religion*.  
Leuba, *The Belief in God and Immortality*.  
McComas, *The Psychology of Religious Sects*.

Professor Coe is one of the best-known authorities in this field and in his book has presented the ripe fruits of many years of research. A sort of personal confession of faith in the preface will at once arrest attention. It will reassure many laymen and students new to this kind of study. The author says that to him the religious enterprise is the most important undertaking in life; he accepts the Christian faith; he is an active worker in a church. He thinks that it is an aid to investigation to look at religion from the inside, though he is careful to point out that he does not appeal to this experience as settling any question of psychology and finds himself especially on guard against giving these personal circumstances too much weight. The work is proof that it has been thought out in freedom from dogmatism, either of the religious or of the scientific kind. No religious experiences are considered as exempt from psychological investigation, either on account of their mysterious nature or because of their sanctity. Several of these more intimate and difficult subjects treated by Professor Coe will not be noted here, though his chapters on them should be read in connection with the same topics referred to in other studies in this course. His chapters on "Conversion," "The Subconscious," "Mysticism," and "Prayer" are of this number.

One of the very valuable and unique features of this work is the discussion of the writings of other authors in this field and the extensive lists of their books and articles compiled in a bibliography which includes practically all of the literature of the science to date. In the fourth chapter is given a definition of religion and a criticism and estimate of other conceptions. This definition is in functional and social terms, with an emphasis upon the importance of persons and personality which is evidently intended to differentiate the definition from earlier

ones very closely related to it. Two or three quotations will express the central idea of this view. "Wherever men intensely identify themselves with something as their very life, there you will almost certainly find 'religion' the descriptive term." In commenting on the definition of religion as the highest social values, he accepts it as his own, for he rightly interprets the author of that definition to mean in this statement that the highest social values are those which at any given time are felt to be the most intense and complete. He says: "If 'highest' refers, not to a specific set of standards, but to a law of social valuation in accordance with which men criticize and reconstruct their standards, then Ames's point of view is to this extent (but not further) identical with the one here suggested" (pp. 71 f.). It is possible that something is meant by "a law of social evolution" which would introduce radical differences in the interpretation, but that does not seem to be the intention of Professor Coe. He further states that religious values are not distinct from ethical or any other values. A working contrast for ordinary usage, which need not be taken too seriously, is that ethics "limits itself to the visible life of men, while religion goes on to raise the question of extending social relationships to the dead and divine beings."

The idea of God is interpreted first in terms of its genesis. In the early mythological representations of the gods, animals, men, processes in nature, and other influences are found to give form and content to the idea. This occurs largely in terms of emotional thinking which may be seen in certain of its features in the thoughts of childhood and in naïve adults. Such objects came into prominence through their connection with man's vital experiences, as when the animals were used for food or when springs furnished water for man and animal and vegetation. The idea of spirit is attributed to the impressions made by shadows, dreams, visions, and to whatever men felt in themselves when they were excited. Gods, as distinguished from the swarm of inferior and capricious, malignant spirits, came to represent the larger, more stable interests of society and were celebrated in the group ceremonials. Social organization is a determining condition for the emergence and development of the god-idea. "Monotheism cannot arise until there is a large political consciousness." Gods may be taken over and modified through conquest, migration, and gradual mingling of peoples. In deliberative groups the divine being no longer gives commands, but becomes a judge and an inspirer of questions. The highly personal deity is a late arrival because man is slow in attaining a high sense of personality. The humanizing of life and the increasing appreciation of justice and love between man and man have given rise to the doctrine that God is love. "A great love is the only conceivable mode of discovering the Christian God." The author expresses the following conviction with reference to the future of this idea: "The thought of God may, indeed, undergo yet many transformations, but in one form or another it will be continually renewed as an expression of the depth and the height of social experience and social aspiration."

A characteristic problem of Professor Coe's conception of religion is its dynamic and creative function (chapters xiii, xiv, xv). Contrary to older views, due in part to the Darwinian doctrine of evolution itself, he holds that human nature is not fixed and unchangeable, but that it is undergoing radical modifications in which religion plays no small part. "The religious experience itself is a revalua-

tion of values, a reconstruction of life's enterprise, a change in desire and in the ends of conduct." The great prophets of the ethical type were the means of effecting such changes. They did not merely maintain existing standards. The sense of sin is cited as another illustration and the obverse of the prophetic spirit. It implies a higher ideal toward which the individual and society aspire. It is the recognition of the fact that human nature needs reconstruction.

This process of revaluation is at the same time a reorganization and reconstruction of reality. The discovery of values is not a copying, but a creation. "Like commerce, government, or education, religion is a process in which the real produces definition of itself." In each case reality is modified in rethinking it. This is true, for example, of human personality. It was created in the discovery. In early society men were not persons as they are today. Instinctive affection and gregariousness are not sufficient to constitute personal relations as they have come to be understood. The sacredness of life, the rights of man, the immeasurable worth of the individual, were slow achievements, not yet wholly realized. Religions like Brahminism and Buddhism, which show a primitive lack of appreciation of the individual, are regarded as arrested in their development at that point. "Religion is the discovery of persons." It is an expression of the developing sense of good-will and justice between man and man. It opposes a more ideal social order to the actual institutions of society. "It is the working out of some cosmic principle through our preferences." This often gives men the feeling that they are the agents of a cause working through them. They may seem passive in the experience just as the scientist feels borne along by the development of his experiment. Socrates probably had a similar sense of an objective direction when in the midst of confusing discussion he would exclaim, "Let us follow the argument." Religion is not then merely the static and conservative attitude toward established values. In its vital representatives, like the great prophets, it is self-critical and reconstructive. In religion, as in all other great concerns, old habits resist new ideas. "Science resists science just as religion resists religion."

In discussing the future life this book applies the functional method and test. The development of the idea is sought in the history of man's thought of himself. Many motives and beliefs are found entering into it. Instinctive fear of death and the sense of a double lingering around after a man has died do not mean that the doctrine of immortality has been achieved. In Israel and in Greece the underworld, the land of the shades, was a place "of feebleness and darkness." The modern discovery of persons brings new questions and a new perspective concerning the whole matter. Three problems are treated by our author—namely, the value of psychical research, the desire for immortality, and the significance of that desire.

Scientific psychology has given little recognition to psychical research. This is thought to be due partly to the large emotional factor in such inquiries, springing from the desire for communion with the dead; partly to the impositions of mediums and "psychics." But a more important fact is that the problem of establishing the reality of personality is, by the very conception of personality, not capable of being treated by laboratory experiment. The sense of living persons which we experience has been worked out through social relationships, and it is suggested that the most convincing proof that people live after death would be

to have them enter in some way into our social life and sustain with us our endeavor to realize further values of this kind.

In answer to the question whether men desire immortality it is surmised that many would not care for individual continuance, but would cling to personal-social relationships and would desire that great souls like Lincoln should persist. It is possible that the formulation of the problem and the pursuit of it may help to realize it. Devotion to social justice "may be a factor in a process whereby immortality, in the literal sense of indissoluble fellowship between persons, is being achieved." This argument will be difficult for many to follow, and the outcome of the chapter will disappoint any who search here for final assertions concerning this sensitive hope of the older religious faith.

Professor Leuba's *Belief in God and Immortality* deals with these two problems by a very different method. The first part, about half the book, is devoted to the history of the idea of the soul and immortality. The remainder is occupied with the tabulation and interpretation of the results of a statistical inquiry with reference to belief in God and immortality. The author advances a somewhat new view to the effect that there are two conceptions of immortality, one found in early primitive peoples, and the other among more modern societies. The earlier notion is not uniform or simple. A man may have many souls. A soul is not immaterial, but it may be small and changeable in its location in the body. It may leave the body temporarily. It may sometimes be seen, especially by certain persons, being identified with one's shadow or reflection in water. Often the breath is taken for the soul. The survival after death is attributed to it, but that does not mean that it is considered immortal. The state after death differs very little to the savage mind from ordinary life. The scene of activity may be in a distant country, but the manner of life is much the same. "The kings remain kings and the slaves, slaves." There may be special abodes for different classes, for warriors, priests, women, and children.

An interesting distinction is made between the soul and the ghost. The latter has a separate origin and is more external. Survival belongs to the ghost. The idea of the ghost arises from several influences—from memory-images exteriorized, from the "sense of presence," dreams, visions. Immortality is distinct from the primitive belief in survival and arises at the beginning of the historical period in the experience of the race. The older belief persisted side by side with the new doctrine in many peoples and for a long time. An interesting parallel is suggested between the appearance of romantic, platonic love and that of the new immortality. It appears in the thought of an eternal existence in which love, friendship, and justice shall be forever victorious. In the older Hebrew belief Sheol was a place of dread where the shades were forgotten by God. The development of the idea of immortality may be seen in the translation of men like Enoch and Elijah to the abode of God, in the messianic prophecies concerning the triumph of the nation, and, finally, in the establishment of individual relations with God which guaranteed perpetual life.

The philosophical attempts to substantiate the doctrine of immortality are reviewed and shown to be insufficient. Among these are the metaphysical arguments based upon the spiritual nature of all reality, or upon the simplicity of the soul, or upon an intelligent first cause, or upon inner experience. More recent

attempts to demonstrate immortality by direct sensory means have also proved futile. These are reviewed in terms of alleged physical manifestations such as those claimed by Eusapia Palladino, whose tricks were so completely exposed in New York in 1910; and psychical manifestations, accounts of which are given at length in the proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research; and alleged apparitions, including the resurrection of Christ. The attempts to prove immortality by methods of modern science remain inconclusive.

In the statistical investigation an attempt was made to get responses concerning belief in God and immortality from American students, scientists, historians, sociologists, and philosophers. The students in one college made returns with reference to immortality as follows: the believers in the Freshman class were 80 per cent; in the Sophomore class, 76 per cent; and in the Senior class, 70 per cent. The Juniors are regarded as exceptionally bright and independent and only 60 per cent of them were believers. It is the author's impression that normally the belief decreases with enlarging intelligence. A surprisingly large number in all classes could not assign any reason for their belief. It was also not expected that 35 per cent of the upperclassmen in a Christian college should be unable to profess belief, while a considerable additional number were indifferent to it. Among a thousand scientists the believers were about equal to the non-believers in immortality, but among the greater scientists of this number only 36.9 per cent were believers, while 59.3 per cent of the lesser scientists were believers. This supports the general conclusion that the belief lessens as intelligence and scientific training increase. The desire for immortality tends to disappear with the loss of belief in it, though in some cases those who no longer believe it would like to. The psychologists are the most skeptical of all the scientists, only 19.8 per cent being believers in immortality. The conclusion is drawn that "in the present phase of psychological science the greater one's knowledge of psychic life, the more difficult it is to retain the traditional belief in the continuation of personality after death." In every group the number of believers in immortality is larger than the number of believers in God. The philosophers were the most troublesome of those to whom the questions were sent, because they so generally had difficulty in understanding the questions and in formulating answers. Numerous charts are provided setting forth in a graphic manner the results of the inquiry. The situation revealed by this study seems to its author to demand a revision of public opinion "regarding the prevalence and the future of the two cardinal beliefs of official Christianity, and shows the futility of the efforts of those who would meet the present religious crisis by devising a more efficient organization and co-operation of the churches."

The concluding part of this work is devoted to a discussion of the utility of these beliefs. It is only upon grounds of utility that they can be justified, and the author thinks that belief in immortality costs more than it is worth. He does not believe that utter pessimism and moral decay would follow the rejection of this idea. He holds that the knowledge and practice of the virtues do not have their original source in transcendental beliefs.

*The Psychology of Religious Sects* by H. C. McComas is a pioneer work in a very important direction. It would be too much to expect completeness or even a treatment commensurate with the title, but this work is suggestive and throws

light upon certain phases of a very large problem. The investigation starts from results obtained in the laboratory with reference to the differences between varying types of people. In the preface the problem and motive of the author are disclosed in this statement: "The differences which appear in the religious life of different denominations have their only justification in the differences of human dispositions and not in any divine preferences." He thinks that the heart of sectarianism may be removed by acknowledging that these differences are matters of individual tastes and temperaments.

The varieties of individuals are illustrated first by portraits which may be taken as suggestive of the far more numerous and radical differences of brains and nervous systems. The influence of environment is registered in the characteristics of the mountaineer, the plainsman, the sailor, the farmer, and the merchant. The daily occupation is stamped upon the mind and physique of each type. The psychological laboratory has measured differences of reaction time, of elementary forms of attention, and of some phases of habit and choice. In association tests the conception of God shows the same variations of imagery and meaning. Racial traits are strongly marked in the Germanic and Latin peoples, and are observable in their music, literature, and philosophy. Investigation of individuals has shown that the bases of religious belief are intellectual, customary, due to inertia, to special needs, and to feeling.

In a chapter on "Sects" the author records his impression that religion is not declining in the United States, but is numerically stronger than ever before. In 1850 there were 149 church members for every thousand persons. In 1906 there were 391 for every thousand. But from 1890 to 1906 there were 41 new sects organized. Among the causes cited for this great variety is immigration, involving differences of nationality, language, forms of worship, systems of doctrine, and social classes. Some sects have their inception in matters external to religion, as in the case of American churches divided by the Civil War. A chapter on "Natural Sects" follows an investigation which sought to characterize the traits of Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Unitarian bodies. It was held that the first was intellectual, the second marked by personal experience largely of the emotional sort, the third by independency based on liberty of conscience, and the fourth by cultural rationalism. The twelfth chapter is an attempt to describe each of the important denominations according to its more conspicuous natural traits. These descriptions are based on the history of the sect, the character of its service, its creeds, activities, interests, and personnel. They are too brief and sketchy to do justice to the great social groups under consideration, but they are nevertheless suggestive and indicative of further needed studies of this kind. Some attention is also given to the family resemblances, and a tabulation of the denominations shows much overlapping in their common traits. Many "leveling forces" are at work reducing the historical differences.

#### Books for Further Reading

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| Hocking, <i>The Meaning of God in Human Experience.</i> | McGiffert, <i>The Rise of Modern Religious Ideas.</i> |
| Rogers, <i>The Religious Conception of the World.</i>   | James, <i>The Will to Believe.</i>                    |
| <i>The Ingersoll Lectures on Immortality.</i>           | Drake, <i>Problems of Religion.</i>                   |